

## **Alaska refuge oil isn't the answer**

By Joseph I. Lieberman & Edward J. Markey, 2/26/2001

JUDGING FROM RECENT statements by President Bush, it seems just about all we have to do solve our national energy woes is look under the tundra. The president has made drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska a centerpiece of his energy policy, suggesting that it will provide a quick fix to the current price crunch and a long-term solution to America's debilitating dependence on foreign sources of oil.

We have been hearing this pat answer to a complicated problem for years, but the fact that the president is endorsing it now doesn't make it any more correct. The reality is that opening the Arctic refuge to drilling will accomplish little except immeasurably and irreversibly degrading one of the last pure preserves of its kind in the world.

This is not just the collective wisdom of the environmental community, which has been fighting this misguided proposal for years, but of most impartial analysts. Even the conservative CATO Institute dismissed the notion that increased domestic production from federal lands such as the refuge could solve our energy problems, declaring it not just foolish but "nonsense on stilts."

That is because the fact is that opening this pristine place for drilling would not provide any energy for at least the next 10 years. This is not just a wild guess but a conservative estimate from the Department of the Interior under President Bush's father.

Why, then, is the administration linking drilling in the refuge to chilling California's immediate energy crisis? That is a very good question. Most experts tell us that California's troubles are not even related to the supply of oil - in fact, about 1 percent of the power generated from power plants in California results from burning crude.

There is not much more sense to the argument that the refuge is the answer to our long-term energy needs. Estimates vary widely, but a study by the US Geological Survey completed in 1998 estimated that only 3.2 billion to 5.2 billion barrels, a mere six- to eight-month supply, would be "economically recoverable" from the refuge over its 50-year lifespan.

In exchange for this short-term return, we would have to pay a very high long-term price, threatening one of the planet's most unique animal and plant habitats. Scientific analyses by the US Fish & Wildlife Service have concluded that drilling would severely harm the refuge's abundant populations of caribou, polar bears, musk oxen, and snow geese.

But the environmental consequences of drilling go well beyond wildlife. Data from the Alaska Department of Conservation show that the Trans-Alaska and Prudhoe Bay oil fields have had an annual average of 409 spills since 1996 of everything from crude oil to acid.

Current oil operations in Alaska's North Slope every year emit about 56,427 tons of nitrous oxides, which cause smog and acid rain, and release up to 110,000 tons of methane, a greenhouse gas that contributes to global warming.

All these factors should make it clear that opening the refuge to oil exploration represents a hollow response to a very real national problem - our addiction to foreign oil.

Americans consume 25 percent of the world's petroleum but possess only 2 percent of the supply. It is clear that we can never hope to drill our way out of our energy problems. Rather, we must develop an energy policy that produces oil and gas where we can but focuses on developing alternative, renewable and cleaner sources of energy; otherwise, we will burden future generations with problems we can and must solve today.

As an alternative, we would suggest that the president broaden his focus. With dramatic changes in the global marketplace and with the accumulating evidence of global warming, we have entered a new world that requires new solutions to our energy challenges. That means adopting a less crude and more creative national energy policy that aims to harness a range of energy sources other than oil.

Increasing our national gas supply is one option. While we cannot rely on natural gas exclusively, this relatively clean fuel has become a staple of our energy generation and has the potential to become an even bigger part of our energy stock.

The North Slope of Alaska is estimated to hold between 32 trillion and 37 trillion cubic feet of natural gas - almost a two-year supply - but the gas and oil industries have not developed the infrastructure to bring this gas to market. The gas is entirely outside the refuge. It can be developed relatively inexpensively and would bring much-needed fuel to US power plants.

New technologies offer the greatest long-term hope. We must invest boldly in the power potential of renewable and alternative sources of energy such as fuel cells, solar energy, wind energy, and geothermal energy.

Finally, we should not only boost our supply and delivery of the traditional and alternative fuel sources but also take aggressive steps to diminish our demand for fossil fuels. We can do so without significantly sacrificing our quality of life and through relatively simple measures that increase our energy efficiency and conservation.

One good idea is to offer tax credits for purchasing hybrid cars, which are already on the market and get 60 to 70 miles per gallon. In fact, if we just set a goal of increasing the efficiency of our automobile fleets by 3 miles per gallon, we would save the same amount of oil over the next 10 years that would be drilled out of the refuge.

Think about that. Slightly more efficient Mustangs and Cougars would mean significantly longer-living caribou and elk. Now that is a tradeoff worth making.

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